



Infodemic: The Epidemic of Information during COVID19

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ABSTRACT

India is one of the world's worst affected countries due to COVID-19 pandemic. The world is struggling to fight against centuries pandemic. Globally governments have been imposed lockdown and restrictions to control situation and minimize spread of infection. Social media was found the most practical and efficient medium to share information and opinions about pandemic. At time of social distancing, social media helped people to share their feelings and find support. Same time overuse of social media platform created panic and misinformation across countries. People sharing unconfirmed information about covid pandemic and governments were found it difficult to handle.

Keywords: Social media, Infodemic, Pandemic, COVID-19, Health Care Workers

INTRODUCTION

Human civilizations have witnessed several health emergencies and pandemics over the centuries.¹ The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic one of the deadliest global health calamities in the 21st century was reported from Wuhan, China in December 2019. World Health Organization (WHO) also declared COVID-19 a Public health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on March 11, 2020.² India was one of the world's worst affected countries due to COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to many other countries Since the onset of this pandemic people have been facing a lot of emotional turmoil which has led to various mental health illnesses like anxiety, stress, sadness, depression, and so on. And, enforcement of lockdowns and restrictions on social gatherings across the globe further posed a global hazard to mankind in over 200 nations worldwide.³ This scenario has been further aggravated due to a lack of reliable information on the spread of illness, knowledge on preventive aspects, and sickness treatment. So far since the onset of this pandemic, worldwide 350,526,393 cases and

over 5,611,765 deaths have been reported due to COVID-19 globally.⁴

In the 21st century, to strengthen the one's knowhow about this epidemic snarl, social media has emerged as a prime platform for effortless access to readily available information across the world. Nowadays, social media has more than 4 billion users globally, covering nearly 56.8% of the world's population, with year-over-year growth of almost 10% of users.⁵ And, the most popular social media networks used to access information and news are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter with 2 billion, 2.8 billion, 1.3 billion, and 1 billion users respectively.⁶ These platforms serve as an effective means of disseminating information as well as connecting people with their families and friends. Individuals express their ideas and viewpoints, whether corroborated or uncorroborated, on social media platforms directly. And, with this large chunk of users across the world, just one click can disseminate any information or news, right or wrong, good or bad, in any corner of the world within a fraction of a second.⁷ Besides this,

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there is also dissemination of lots of misinformation and disinformation being shared through these social media platforms, which has led the people in the lurch to whom to rely on or not. So, the detrimental side of social media platforms is that anyone can broadcast information without a trustworthy source as soon as they hear about it.

Given the growing concerns about fake news propagating on these platforms, the impact of social media during this pandemic has become more significant.⁸ WHO's chief (at Munich Conference, 2020) has remarked "We are not only fighting a pandemic; we are also fighting an infodemic, which has emphasized the risk of bogus information during this epidemic."⁹ Governments have been found battling during the peak of the Covid pandemic with people's reluctance to follow Covid standards due to the spread of misleading news on social media.

With this emerging scenario, health misinformation has become a public health concern and unfortunately, misinformation or disinformation about it spreads readily and social media acts as a fertile ground for health misinformation dissemination.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, physicians and nurses have good levels of health literacy and can play a pivotal role in addressing medical information as patients trust them as authentic health information providers.¹¹ But these frontline health care workers are more vulnerable to come under the fire of misinformation due to the dependency of masses on social media for seeking information, which can result in detrimental decisions throughout the field of medicine. So, emphasis should be laid to provide valid and accurate information to people in locally, culturally, and easily understandable specific mediums of communications.¹⁰ Digital technologies shall be put in action to establish strong collaboration between health providers and these social media platforms to strengthen the health literacy and to debunk health-related misinformation.¹² These platforms can be used to address public queries and grievances among health providers and different stakeholders so that all should know about what to expect and do before, during, and after an emergency event to mitigate panic and to increase one's ability to respond and recover from a potentially stressful situation.¹³ Henceforth, the need of the hour is that flashes of these social media disinformation must be addressed as a threat and challenge for the masses when they are already confronting never-ending obstacles.

CONCLUSION

The sudden and unanticipated disconnection of social interactions amongst people has increased dependency on social media for seeking health-related information and it has become a preferred method for information accessing and dissemination among all cadres of stakeholders. Contents disseminated on social media put a significant impact on ones' ideas and emotions and constantly getting an unchecked

blend of this true and false information on social media adds confusion and converts a pandemic into an Infodemic.

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